



## **Accessibility Problems to Disables Tourists at Buddhist Heritage Site at Takht-Bhai, Mardan Pakistan**

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### **Abstract**

The Buddhist heritage site of Takht -Bhai is one of the main heritage sites in Pakistan to attract tourists on national and international level and promote the cultural and religious tourism in the region. One of the main challenges at the Takht-Bhai Buddhist heritage site is that many people, especially those with disabilities, are unable to fully enjoy their visit. The site's attractions, facilities, and services are not equally accessible to everyone. Disabled visitors face several difficulties, such as steep and uneven pathways, lack of ramps, no chairlift facilities no wheelchair, friendly toilets, and no transport options to reach the upper portion of the site. These issues make it hard for them to explore the site comfortably. This paper aims to highlight the key problems faced by physically disabled visitors based on their experiences and the author's personal observations. It seeks to bring attention to these problems and suggest possible solutions to improve accessibility for everyone.

### **Introduction**

The research paper is a part of my PhD dissertation. A country is identified by a variety of its significant natural, historical, and cultural resources. Due to the greater worth of their cultural heritage, these resources are typically preserved and conserved by the national government, private owners, charitable trusts or by the local community. They are worldwide recognized as historic or heritage sites. We are lucky nation that we have the Buddhist heritage site of Takht –Bhai, a world heritage site is one of the main heritage sites in Pakistan to attract tourists from all over the World and promote the cultural and religious tourism in the region and to increase national and local economy through tourism on national and international level. The magnificent archaeological World heritage site was initially discovered using Xuanzang (602–64) trip logs, a Chinese monk pilgrim who travelled throughout greater India in pursuit of Buddhist literature. The major stupa at the site, which was the largest and most impressive he had ever seen, appears to have already sustained damage even in Xuanzang time. The first person to refer to the location in contemporary times was General Court, a French officer serving in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's (1780–1839) service. Dr. Henry Walter Bellew, a British medical officer of Indian descent, first investigated the



area in 1864 as part of an archaeological survey. This led to a series of excavations, and Harold Hargreaves studied the area in 1910–1911.

Hargreaves states, “of the many Buddhist sites in Gandhara, none is better known than that of Takht-i-Bhai and no spot has been the object of so many excavations both irregular and Systematic than this isolated ruin” (Hargreaves, 1910-11; Sehrai, 1982 & Behrendt, 2004). The Buddhist heritage complex of Takht-Bhai is more preserve and playing a vital role in promotion of religious and cultural tourism. The national and international tourists of different age and group are visiting to this world known Buddhist heritage site but unfortunately, the site does fulfill the needs of the disables persons as per United Nation Declaration of Human Rights declaration.

Human rights of People with disabilities (PwDs) have been defended in United Nation Declaration of Human Rights since 1948 and more extended to implementation of council on rights of persons with disabilities (CRPD) on 13th December 2006 and 2014 by the United Nation General Assembly (Seatzu 2017). In an problem free environment, initiatives have gained momentum toward creating an inclusive, barrier free and rights based society. Furthermore, Article 30 specifically addresses tourism, recognizing and ensuring that Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) are fully included in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sports. The CRPD protects a number of main areas to safeguard full and equal participation of PwDs containing accessibility to a heritage site as assigned in Article 9. Cultural life, as defined by the United Nations declaration on the human Rights of physical Disabilities persons (2006), is a significant part of any person’s citizenship. The CRPD highlights that states must be responsible to remove these obstacles by enacting laws, regulations, and other measures that guarantee disabled people equal status in society as well as access to the heritage sites physically (Lord, 2010).

Diekmann (2018) stated that heritage tourism is an existing example of how much a disable person can completely and efficiently enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms as expressed in human right declarations. Srisom (2023), expressed that accessible tourism targets great quality of the industry and make access usefully to other fundamental rights such as education, health, rehabilitation, employments and more. Researchers have discovered that improving national and social interests, like accessibility and convenience for people with physical disabilities on heritage site, can improve the quality of tourism, as does conserving heritage treasures to encourage heritage tourism. It encourages the study to investigate whether Takht-Bhai, a Buddhist heritage site, should take into account the accessibility requirements for people with physical disabilities. The disabled population has become a significant consumer segment. According to the US Census Bureau, the number of persons with disabilities is estimated at 51.2 million, which is 18.1 % of the US population, that number anticipated to double around 100 million by the year 2030 (Ozturk et al., 2008).

The tourism industry is beginning to recognize the economic benefits of serving people with disabilities (Ray and Ryder, 2003). Tourists with disabilities have special and sometimes individualized needs that must be accommodated. Within the disabled population, differences in physical, mental or emotional conditions may lead to different needs, interests, and limitations for their tourism activities.

Miller and Kirk (2002) explored how the United Kingdom’s tourism industry adopted the “access to all” standards specified in the 1995 Disability



Discrimination Act and concluded that most tourism industry professionals do not understand the specific needs of customers with disabilities.

The purpose of the current research is to contribute to a better understanding of Buddhist heritage tourism experience of persons with disabilities. It aims at analysing the current status of service quality provided by the Pakistan tourism industry and Directorate of archaeology and Museums (DOAM), with an emphasis on service failures, by identifying the types of failures that occurred. Here are some of the main problems, challenges, and issues that physically disabled persons named Sibghatullah and Wesal Khan, faced when visiting the heritage site of Takht-Bhai (pl ).

**Elevation from Sea Level:** The Buddhist heritage complex is located at an elevation of approximately 500 feet (150 meters) above sea level. Due to its high location, visitors must climb a significant distance to reach the upper portion, where the main stupa and monastic area are situated. This steep climb makes it difficult for people with physical disabilities to access and explore the site fully. The absence of facilities such as ramps or alternative transportation further adds to the challenge, limiting their ability to experience the historical and cultural significance of the site.

**Stairs to the Height:** The stairs leading to the stupas and monastery at Takht-Bhai are various and vertical, making it really difficult for physically disabled persons to climb. The absence of ramps or lifts further adds to the challenge, as there is no alternative route for wheelchair users or those with disability injuries. The rough and rocky nature of the stairs increases the risk of falling or dropping, making access unsafe for those with physical limitations. In most of the places the staircases are disconnected to each other. As a result, disabled visitors are unable to reach the main heritage areas and fully experience the historical and cultural significance of the site.

**Vertical and Irregular Pathways:** The site is located in a hilly area and it difficult to climb with rough and irregular surfaces making access challenging for those with physically disability issues. Vertical and unbalanced pathways are the basic problems for disabled persons to visit the Buddhist heritage site of Takht-Bhai. The site, worldwide known for its cultural and archaeological significance, is situated on a steep hill, requiring tourists to cross vertical terrain, stairs, and rocky surfaces. These structural hurdles make it difficult for accessibility, particularly for those with disabilities.

The absence of ramps, handrails, and other accessibility structures further create the issue to disabled visitors to fully enjoy the cultural and historical valuable heritage site. Without suitable infrastructure developments, despite facilities like paved walkways, rest spaces, and transportation support, a huge section of the populace cannot easily access Takht-Bhai, which makes wide-ranging tourism difficult. To make the site more accessible, authorities should consider installing wheelchair-friendly ramps, implementing guided tours with assistive technologies, and creating awareness among staff and local communities to better accommodate the needs of disabled tourists. An inclusive approach to heritage conservation, preservation and tourism would not only promote cultural gratitude among all visitors but also uphold the principles of universal access and equal opportunity.



**Absence of Chair Lift Facilities:** The absence of chair lift services at the Takht-Bhai heritage site is a key accessibility challenge for disabled persons. It takes a lot of physical effort to reach the top due to the site's high elevation and difficult terrain, making it impractical for anyone with physical disabilities. For users with restricted mobility, it is practically impossible to visit the site on their own due to the steep walkways, uneven slopes, and rough scenery. A chair lift system facility would greatly develop accessibility by providing a safe and suitable approach of transport to the upper portions of the Buddhist heritage site of Takht-Bhai. Such an initiative would not only enable disabled visitors to experience the rich cultural and historical heritage of Takht-Bhai but also encourage the other visitors and will promote tourism. Additionally, implementing such structure could attract more tourists, including old age persons and individuals with disabilities, thereby boosting the overall visitor experience and promoting cultural heritage of the valley and preservation of the site.

**Wheelchair Accessibility:** Visitors with physical disabilities are unable to access the top areas of the site because there are no ramps, lifts or wheelchair-accessible paved pathways. One of the key issues is the absence of wheelchair-friendly ramps. The pathways are not paved or designed to accommodate wheelchairs, making it nearly impossible for disabled persons to visit the site and share his experiences. Additionally, there are no handrails or resting place along the path way, which further adds difficulty for physical disabilities.

**No Alternate Transport:** There are no shuttle services or other transportation options to assist physically disabled visitors in reaching the upper parts of the Takht-Bhai heritage site. The vertical and rough pathways make it difficult for those persons with mobility deficiencies to access the site. Without transport facilities like chair lifts or shuttles, physically disabled persons face more problems in exploring the world known Buddhist heritage site. Initiating such facilities would make the site more accessible and general for everyone.

**Risk of Falling and Slipping:** The hilly topography and uneven surfaces increase the risk of falls, especially for those with limited physical disabilities. Without proper support, such as railings or horizontal pavements, moving around the heritage site can be risky for the disabled. Improving the paths and adding protection structures would help make the site safer and more accessible for those having disabilities and old aged persons.

**Absence of Resting Areas:** The absence shaded areas, benches, or resting spots along the climb, making it exhausting for disabled visitors at the Takht-Bhai heritage site, which makes it challenging for tourists, especially for physically disabled persons, to take rest through their visit. The steep and irregular paths need a lot of energy and without benches or shaded areas, the disabled visitors have no place to rest. This absence of resting areas can cause uneasiness and tiredness, making it difficult for persons with physical disabilities to walk around the site. Adding benches, shaded areas, and labeled resting spots would improve the experience for all visitors and it will create positive impact on the promotion of Buddhist heritage tourism in the area.



**Absence of Toilets on the Top:** There are no toilette facilities at the upper top of the Takht-Bhai Buddhist heritage site, which makes problems for visitors, especially disabled persons. The steep climb and stretched visit period make access to toilets important, but without such facilities, visitors with disabilities issues face serious embarrassment. The absence of available toilets adds to their challenges, making it difficult for them to explore the site easily. Fitting toilets at the top would improve accessibility and ensure a better capability for all visitors.

**Lack of Tour Guides and Support Services:** There are no tour guides or staff members to assist at the Takht-Bhai heritage site who are specifically trained to assist physically disabled persons. Physically disabled tourists frequently need assistance with direction, movement, and understanding the stupa, monasteries and other structures at the site, but there is no committed support offered. Without trained guides, it becomes challenging for disabled to explore the site carefully and easily. Providing special training to staff members at heritage sites would make the site more accessible and friendly for all the visitors.

**Challenges with Transportation and Parking:** The parking area may not be close to the main entrance, and there may not be proper arrangements for disabled people's friendly transport. Disabled visitors may find it challenging to get to the Takht-Bhai cultural site because of the parking lot's distance from the main entrance. There are no special transportation options, like shuttle buses or vans that can accommodate disabled persons, to assist them in getting to the entrance, nor are there any parking spots reserved for individuals with disabilities. Due to insufficient accommodations, disabled tourists must travel a considerable and difficult distance alone, which can be dangerous and difficult. The location would be more convenient for everyone, particularly those with mobility deficiencies, if it had ramps, closer parking spots, and accessible transportation choices.

**Lack of Awareness and Policies:** There is no awareness about the needs of physically disabled visitors, and no clear policies or initiatives to make the site more inclusive. At the Takht-Bhai heritage site, there is minute to no knowledge of the requirements of physically disabled visitors. Many people, including staff members of the site and tourists, are unaware of the problems that disabled people's experience. There are no clear guidelines or initiatives in place to increase accessibility or create a more hospitable atmosphere on the website. Disabled tourists still have distress travelling and enjoying the heritage site in the absence of suitable planning, policies, or efforts. A more attractive environment for all visitors could be succeeded by applying manageable policies, educating staffs, and increasing awareness the visitors.

These types of problems make it challenging for physically disabled persons to fully experience and appreciate the historical and cultural significance of Takht-Bhai and such type of issue at heritage site have a negative role in tourism promotion. These issues make it very difficult for physically disabled persons to visit and enjoy the Takht-Bhai heritage site. Because of the steep paths, lack of ramps, absence of transport facilities, and no trained staff, disabled visitors cannot fully explore the site or learn about its history and culture. When



a heritage site is not accessible, it discourages many tourists from visiting, which create a bad image of the heritage and having negatively impact on the promotion of tourism in the global world. If more people, including physically disabled visitors, could access the heritage site without difficulty, it would help promote tourism and attract more tourists from around the world. Making the site broad would benefit both tourists and the local economy.

To address these issues, authorities should conduct feasibility studies to measure the installation of chair lifts or other assistive transport mechanisms. Government support, collaboration with heritage conservation organizations, NGOs and funding from tourism development agencies could help make this project a reality, ensuring that Takht-Bhai becomes an accessible and welcoming destination for all the national, international and religious monks tourists. To improve accessibility, authorities should consider constructing smooth ramps at key points, installing handrails for support, and providing resting spots. Developing an electric shuttle service would help physically disabled visitors to reach the upper portion of the site without any difficulty. Moreover, training staff to assist physically disabled tourists and raising awareness among the locals and the visitors about accessibility needs of the disables would make the site more inclusive. Improving wheelchair accessibility at Takht-Bhai is important for promoting inclusive tourism and ensuring that everyone, including disabled individuals and elderly visitors, can experience this important heritage site without barriers.

### Conclusion

This study assisted in understanding the difficulties faced by physically disabled visitors. The key purpose for these challenges is the lack of awareness and the failure to include accessibility features during the design and planning stages. As a result, many people, especially those with physical disabilities, experience inconvenience while visiting the Buddhist heritage site of Takht-Bhai.

Promoting awareness among the locals and educating professionals about the importance of universal accessibility can lead to better design solutions. By considering the needs of all users from the beginning, heritage sites can become more inclusive. Such learning exercises help develop practical solutions that make historic places accessible to everyone.

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